

Saudi arabia the impact of religion on nationalism and ideas of cultural unity es...

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



In my opinion, the key factors in Nagel's discussion come down to ethnicity and religion. Ethnicity and religion have proven to be divisive forces which, in tandem with race, can create a false sense of superiority and disharmony, a phenomenon that is aggravated by problems of gender and sexuality. I agree that the behavior of American GIs in Vietnam and early European explorers in the Americas was motivated by ingrained Euro-centric beliefs about racial superiority backed by religiously endowed moral authority (Nagel, 2003, 66-67). This is what determined the course of inter-racial relations in Southeast Asia during the war, and between the native peoples of the Americas and Europeans. I agree with Nagel that gender and sexual boundaries are innate to systems of ethnicity, race and nationality, which I have found to be the case in my native Saudi Arabia.

In Saudi Arabia, religion plays a defining role in both gender and ethno-centric conceptions of the male-female hierarchy. Religion has the force of law and thus defines ethno-nationalist identity and determines the place that women will occupy in this Islamic society. If, as Nagel contends, ideas concerning gender, sex and sexuality lie at the heart of our notions of ethnicity and nationality, then Saudi Arabia can be held up as an example of this phenomenon. "To define who is pure and who is impure, to shape our idea of ourselves and others, to fashion feelings of sexual desire and notions of desirability (and) to leave us with a taste for some ethnic sexual encounters and a distaste for others" (Nagel, 2003, 1). This idea of purity and impurity in terms of sex and gender is one that resonates in my native country and, as such, is a highly relevant standpoint from which to view the relationship between gender, ethnicity and nationality.

I agree that, as Nagel points out, gender distinctions in the United States and elsewhere are seen through the prism of ethnic reality, and that these are “perceived” to be real, which essentially makes them real (Nagel, 2003, 43). However, I would emphasize the point, which Nagel makes, that these are social constructs. In Saudi Arabia, religion has been used to establish a social construct, one that achieves a perception of cultural homogeneity that unifies the country in ways that are not comparable in other parts of the world. Through this phenomenon, the religious power structure seeks to make members of Saudi society feel that they share membership as part of a unified group. Thus, gender is subordinated within the equation. In my opinion, Nagel could have benefited from a closer examination of the phenomenon of state-supported religion and its basis in the ethno-nationalist ethos of a country like Saudi Arabia.

Whereas religion can have a mollifying effect on perceptions of gender and ethnicity within a population (or between populations), in Saudi Arabia the opposite is proving to be true. There, religion, which has a normative effect on personal behavior, gender relations, cultural expectations and ethnic identity, is undergoing conflict which can threaten the ideal of nationalism that it is intended to foster. In my opinion, this is a development that could have added depth to Nagel’s thesis. That this social construct and its impact on national identity is proving to be tenuous calls into question the validity of the assertion that religion as a means of inventing nationalism can ever be more than an artificial and temporary construct. This is a particularly troubling question throughout the Muslim world, and especially in places like

Saudi Arabia, where the social concept of religion is more powerful than notions of state or government.

Bibliography

Nagel, J. Race, Ethnicity and Sexuality (2003). New York: Oxford University Press.